Emily Wolfram

***I was here***

I awake with a start to the harsh sound of Father Jones’s voice on the loud speaker. Somehow in the night I had managed to tune out the sound of Father’s sermon and fall asleep for a few hours. But the sharp rays of the 5 a.m. sunlight are enough to jolt me from my dreams and back into reality. I sit up in my small cot and look down at the blue ballpoint pen and scattered scraps of napkin I had been busy writing on the night before.

A small hand grabs my arm and I look down on the smiling face of my little sister, Laura. “Well good morning baby girl,” I said, pulling Laura onto my lap. “Did you sleep well?” Laura shakes her head and her bouncy brown curls frame her delicate face. She looked like the typical seven year old, but the dark shadows of many sleepless nights had stained the skin beneath her wide brown eyes. “Yeah I haven’t been sleeping well either,” I sigh brushing the curls away from Laura’s face, trying to tame them into some sort of braid.

“What did you write this time Mary?” asks Laura in a soft childish voice as she pulls her head away from my fussy hand.

“Well, I wrote a fairytale,” I answers reaching for the comb from beneath my bed, “If you let me do your hair I will read it to you.”

“Is there a princess?” Laura questions eagerly.

“Of course there is a princess,” I reply.

“Okay, fine. But don’t pull too tight,” she said pouting at the comb.

“I promise. Now turn around,” I answer, as I begin the story, carefully combing through her unruly curls, “Once upon a time, there was a princess. She was very brave and had long golden hair. But one day, the beautiful princess was forced to leave her father, the King. And she was very very sad. But the brave princess travelled to a strange new kingdom where a wicked wizard was holding her mother the Queen hostage with an evil curse.”

“Does the princess escape?” Laura asks turning her head towards me.

“Hey watch it! You are going to mess me up,” I scold refastening her hair ribbon. “Yes the princess defeats the evil wizard and she saves the Queen. Then they all go back home and live happily ever after.”

“I like that story.” Laura says resting her head on my shoulder, “Hey Marry why do you write on napkins?”

“Well the Greeting Committee didn’t have enough paper to ration so I write on whatever I can get my hands on,” I answer brushing my own hair back into a braid. “If I want to be a writer than I am going to need to write all the time.”

“Why would you wan to be a writer? When I grow up I’m going to be a princess or a Hollywood star.” Laura said flashing her gap toothed smile.

“Ooh Princess Laura, I like that,” I teased, “I want to be a writer so I can leave a mark on the world. I want people to read my words hundreds of years from now and know that I was here. Now hurry up and get dressed we can’t be late for morning meeting. Here I’ll button you up.” I fasten the buttons of Laura’s standard issued, gray wool frock. The skirt barley reaches her knees. “Goodness, you are growing like a weed, Mama is going to need to ask the Committee for a new one.”

“Mary,” Laura whisperers, “I miss daddy. When can we go home?”

“I don’t know baby girl. I miss him too. But we are safe here” I say softly, “Now no crying for you, you are much too pretty to be crying. Run along to the meeting hall and see if you can get Michael from the nursery on your way.”

I watch as Laura hurries away to wake our younger brother and begin getting dressed and as always I slip my pen into my front pocket. As I walk outside the humid air hits my faces and a bead of sweat run down the back of my neck. Since moving to the People’s Agricultural Project in Jonestown, it has been hard getting used to a lot of things, and the heat is no exception. The South American jungle was much hotter than San Francisco. Despite the dense jungle foliage that surrounded the village the heat was unbearable. I whip the sweat from my brow and try to focus on the day ahead. But I cannot keep my mind from drifting back to before, when we were a happy and unbroken family.

Mama and Papa started going to the People’s Temple after meeting Father Jones at a civil rights rally. The temple was a place of complete acceptance and joy. Laura and I sang in the children’s choir and in the summer, we travelled on large buses all over California. We were never happier. Then, Father Jones decided to move the congregation to Guyana and in one night everything changed. When Mama heard about the migration she began begging my dad to go. But Papa didn’t want us to leave. Mama became very sad. She stopped smiling and spent all day listening to Father’s sermons on the radio. I might only be eleven and a quarter but I know Papa loved Mama with all his heart but it just wasn’t enough to keep her from leaving.

I hazily remember being woken up in the middle of the night before the sun had rose. Mama shook me from my sleep and told me to grab Laura, a change of cloths and nothing else. I ran into Laura’s room and woke her up. Mama grabbed Michel from his crib and told us to be silent so we waited quietly. Headlights shown through the window and Mama hustled us towards the door. Laura asked where Daddy was and Mama told her he would be meeting us there. I tried to ask where “there” was but Mama just looked straight ahead without answering.

A man I recognized vaguely from the People’s Temple sat in the driver’s seat of the Beige Cadillac. As the engine started, Mama laughed and tossed her honey colored hair behind her shoulder, she said, “Mary Meadows you better smile now, because we are headed to paradise.” I tried to smile but as I looked back towards our disappearing home tears flowed down my cheeks. In the distance, I saw my father running frantically from the house. He was barefoot and wearing pajamas but nonetheless, he chase us until the car sped away, leaving him, our home and California far behind. I don’t remember much of the journey to Guyana other than it was long and the car ride was hot and my stomach felt sick.

That was two months ago and since then life in paradise has been strange. Life here is like a smooth oiled machine; all nine hundred or so members are one large family. We are all brothers and sisters protected by Father and yet it feels nothing like a home.

As I walk towards the Children’s Garden, I leave my thoughts behind me. We all have jobs in Jonestown even the little ones. For the most part the young boys work in the fields and me and the other eleven to fourteen year old girls take care of the babies in the Children’s Garden. However today was a special day and I hustle along to the large tin roofed meeting center. Inside the room, women are fastening exotic flowers into large bouquets and the men are helping set up the instruments for the brass band.

All of a sudden the sound of cheerful chatter stops as a tall man slowly walks into the room. Father Jones takes a seat in front of the crowd and removes his tinted shades. Scanning the quiet room with a powerful gaze that seems to penetrate into each individual’s soul Father Jones clears his voice.

“Hello, my children,” he booms, his clear words echo around the room.

“Hello Father,” the congregation responds in unison.

“Today… is an exciting day… for all of us. As you all know our friend Senator Ryan, is on his way to visit us.” He pauses scanning the room, “This is a chance for us to show the rest of the world the glory of socialism and the power of our civilization,” Not a person makes a sound as Father pauses again, “Now this is more than just a friendly visit, this is an investigation. And it is our chance to prove how superior The People’s Temple truly is.” Cheers rise up around me. “Shh shhh shhh,” Father Jones hushs, “It may be a day for celebration but there is still business to take care of.” The emotions in the room instantly change from cheerful to anxious.

Suddenly there is the sound of struggling as old man; Samuel is dragged onto the stage by his son. The crowd rustles in excited anticipation of the punishment. From across the room I see Laura holding our baby brother and rush to her side. In front of me, women stand on their tiptoes to witness the humiliation.

Jones’s voice booms, “Samuel’s son has informed us that his father wishes to return to America with the Senator.” Father’s eye glitter coldly as he looks at the trembling man. “What do you have to say about this betrayal?”

“Pl–pl-please, Father, my heart it’s been hurting. I’m not strong enough to work. I j-j-just want to see my wife again.” Samuel stammers.

“Ah you say you are weak then?” Father asks. Samuel nods slowly, “Weakness is the sign of all evil. You have given into fear and for that you must be punishes.” A cheer ripples through the crowd at these words. Father raises his hand to silence us and motions towards the old man’s son, “Go fetch today’s punishment. Samuel remove your shirt a kneel down here.” He orders briskly.

The old man unwillingly obeys. His paper like skin stretches too tight across his torso and his rib cage protrudes from his chest. The crowd begins to chant, “Traitor, traitor, traitor.” Samuel’s son returns carrying a large snake. I gasp as the people around me cheer. The large yellow snake is thicker than a tree limb and its eyes are cold and unfeeling.

“Now Samuel you have been a coward, so you must face fear itself and hope it does not destroy you.” Jones declares grinning wildly with eyes cold like the snakes, “Don’t worry she is not poisonous, at least not until she bites.” Samuel’s eyes widen in terror as his son wraps the large snake around his feeble frame. Samuel begins to sob and beg his son for mercy. But the young man just turns away. The snake curls its way around Samuel’s neck. The creature rears its head backwards and then like lightning it sinks its fangs deep into Samuel’s shoulder. Blood and venom run down from the gaping wound and Samuel shrieks in agony. The snake strikes again and again deep into Samuel’s bloody flesh. Jones nods his approval and two large men drag Samuel and the snake into the jungle.

“Now,” says Father Jones, “Does anyone else wish to leave?” he scans the crowd with his all-seeing eyes. No one makes a sound; from the distance there is the sound of a loud gunshot and then silence. In Laura’s arms Michael begins to cry. “Well then, back to the festivities I want music and laughter,” proclaims Father. The crowd scatters to obey Father’s wishes.

The rest of the day is spent like Father had requested. We decorate and bake until it is almost time for the Senator’s arrival filling the air with the smell of fresh bread and the perfume of flowers. The conversations remain lighthearted and no one speaks of Samuel or the punishment we had played a part in. As the band began to play jazz music filled the room and Jonestown was transformed into a place of merriment. The morning passes quickly until the sun is high in the afternoon sky.

From the corner of the room, I hear whispers that the Senator’s plane has landed. Laura and I search around the crowd for a glimpse of Senator Ryan but the crowds of people block our view. Together, Laura and I dance to the brass band and sing songs with the rest of the choir. A type of lightness that did not usually exist in Jonestown had filled the room. But it had an air of falsehood to it. I wonder if the Senator can tell that there is more to this place than the illusion Father Jones has been creating for him.

Right before Father prepares to make his grand speech, Mama ushers us back to our cabin with the rest of the children. As we leave the meeting hall, I catch a glimpse of Senator Ryan. With my pen, I quickly jot down a description of the man on the back of my hand so I won’t forget. He has white hair, and a warm smile. He wears a fancy suit like the one Papa wore to Aunt Gina’s wedding.

As we return to our cabin, Mama tucks Laura and I in and says goodnight. Then she carries Michael to the nursery. As I drift off to sleep, I can’t shake the image of Samuel’s face twisted in pain from my mind.

The next morning, I awake to complete silence. The sun is already up and there are no lectures coming from the loud speaker outside. “Laura, are you awake?” I whisper. In her sleep, Laura snores gently and turns her head to the other side of her pillow. I tiptoe out of the room carful not to wake the other children. The air outside is filled with a strange tension. I can sense a change had occurred in the village, like a shift in energy. The sun was shining warm and high in the sky. It must be mid-afternoon, yet the usual sound of busy work and conversation is absent. I wander into my mother’s cabin. She is sitting on her bed with the other women mending clothing.

“Hello, honey.” She smiles warmly. “The Father has given us a day of rest. Isn’t that lovely?”

“Yes, but why Mama?” I ask, sitting on the edge of the cot watching her hand weave the needle in and out of the torn blouse.

“Do not question him Mary. The Father knows what is right.” she scolds, “Just enjoy the day, and write some more of those stories you love.”

I say goodbye and wander back to the cabin where I spend the rest of the day scribbling my stories on scraps of cloth and napkins. The Princess was just about to escape the wicked woods with the help of the brave knight in a fancy suit when my eyes begin to feel heavy and I fall back asleep.

The sudden sound of thunder jolts me awake. At some point, during my sleep, the sky had turned a dark blue and rain splashed down upon the roof. Lightning strikes against the sky like electric fingers griping at the clouds. There is a buzzing sound from outside my window. The sound of Father’s voice echoes from the loudspeaker calling us all to the meeting hall. His voice sounds strained and nervous.

Laura and I rush quickly to the meeting hall trying to avoid the storm. I grip her hand tightly in mine; something does not feel right. It was more than just the peculiar weather; the air was thick with darkness. A group of men with guns are walking around in the shadows. I quicken my steps pulling Laura faster beside me.

The entire congregation is crammed into the small meeting room. The smell of thunderstorm and sweat wafts around the enclosed space. Father Jones approaches his podium. His coal black hair is tussled and his eyes show a wild panic like an animal shot in the leg. His words come out fast and frantic. My mother puts her hand on my shoulder to sooth me. I try to make some kind of sense from the buzzing words catapulting around the room. All I can make out from the chaos is; “gunshot,” “senator,” “murder,” and “catastrophe.” Father Jones’s voice rings out above the noise. I try to focus as he begins to speak.

“There has been a great error. Our lives as we know them have ended, but do not fear my children,” Father Jones yells over the roaring thunder. Confused shouts echo around the hall. But Father raises a silencing hand. “Senator Ryan has been killed. He was shot by one of our own,” states Father Jones. The voices around me grow louder and I hear Mama gasp. “Silence! We are not the villains! It is the fault of the American Government and their corrupt ways. We have called our allies the Soviet Union but they are refusing to let us in,” Shrieks Father.

“What will happen to us!” shouts a woman from the back of the room.

“They are coming. They are coming and they will slay our children and torture our babies. They will burn our flesh and snap our bones.” Father screams, spit flying from his fiery mouth, “Can you hear it!? Can you? They are sending the helicopters now! We must act fast!”

“Mama who is coming? Who’s after us?” Laura asks, fearful tears pooling on her cheeks. Mama covers Laura’s mouth roughly with her hand and shushes her.

A chill crawls up my spine and the air grows thick around me. I feel the weight of my mother’s hand pressing down on my shoulder. However, her hand no longer brings me any comfort but rather her tight grip traps me where I stand. I am suddenly afraid. Bending down to pretend to tie my shoe, I escape my mother’s grasp. She is too captivated by Father Jones’s frantic words to notice. I look over at Laura who is burying her head in the folds of my mother’s skirt. I try to catch her gaze but as Father’s words grow louder my heart beats faster and I find myself slowly making my way to the back of the room. Carefully darting between the legs of the other adults and children, I try to escape the chaotic room. Again, the thunder sounds and the flashes of lightning pierce the darkness.

All of a sudden, the room fills with noise as three strong men carry a large vat marked by a green C filled with dark purple liquid. Momentarily mesmerized by the sound of the sloshing liquid, I see women begin pulling their children towards the vat. No longer hearing Jones’s words, my instincts kick in and I sprint towards the door. My heartbeat pounds in my ears and I feel a sense of panic building in my throat. Just a few more feet and I can find refuge in the jungle. Then I will search for help and everything will be okay. Mama will protect Laura and Michael.

I run faster until I cannot feel my feet hitting the ground. The back door is inches from my outstretched arm. In the corner of my eye, I see a young woman and her small son fall to the ground. The sounds of crying infants fill the air and I freeze turning back to look for Laura. Suddenly, rough hands grab me from behind. My body slams against the ground and my pen breaks inside my pocket. Ink and blood run down my leg and I try to scream but a hand covers my mouth. A tall man half carries, half drags me back towards Mama. I drop to the ground and run into Mama’s familiar arms. My tears stain her dress and I breathe in finding safety in the familiar vanilla scent.

“Shh baby, it’s okay, It’s okay. I won’t let them get us. It will all be over soon.” Mama soothes, stroking my hair. From her side she lifts a small syringe filled with the purple liquid. “Come here baby. Mama’s going to make sure all the pain goes away. Father says we are all going to be safe now.,” she whispers. I slowly back away from Mama trying to beg her to stop but the words catch in my face. The man who dragged me away from my escape holds me down roughly grabbing my throat and forcing my mouth open. I try to kick and scream but Mama squirts the liquid into my mouth.

The taste of bitter almonds and grape burns my throat. Gagging I try to stand but fall back to the ground and my broken pen falls from my pocket trickling ink on the dirty concrete floor. The world around me begins to twist and blur. The sticky blue ink pools on the ground as I gasp for air. With the nail of my pinky finger, I shakily scratch the words; *I was here* onto the concrete floor.

Amongst the sounds of crying infants and the persistent drone of Jones’s voice, I hear a soft sob to my left. Tilting my aching head towards the pitiful sound I see a boy about five years old with wispy blonde hair lying beside me. His face is distorted in pain but still I recognize him as one of the children who played in the Child’s Garden. My eyes meet his and I mouth, “we are going to be okay.” His blue eyes widen reminding me of Laura and I watch as he shakes his small head, ‘no’. Father Jones’s voice pierces through my clouded thoughts;

***“Free at last. Keep--keep your emotions down. Keep your emotions down.”***

With all that was left of my strength, I reach out towards the boy and grab his shaking hand. I hold on strong as he begins to shudder and convulse. Pulling his dying body towards me, I hold him close until his mouth begins to foam. After one last violent shake, his body goes limp and I watch him die in my arms. My strength gives out and I let his body fall beside mine.

***“Children, it will not hurt. If you'd be--if you'll be quiet.”***

My eyes roll up towards the ceiling and I feel a heavy weight press down on my chest. My entire body grows cold and the pounding in my head silences the building chaos around me. I open my mouth to cry out for Mama but no sound comes out.

***“If you'll be quiet.”***

For a moment I am filled with absolute and endless fury. This was not the way my life was supposed to end. I was going to write a book. I was going to be more famous than Judy Blume and Vonnegut combined. I was going to inspire people. I was going to marry a man with eyes like David Cassidy.

***“So be patient. Be patient. Death is—“***

I fade in and out of consciousness as my body grows weaker and I let go of the anger that fills me.

***“Death is a million times preferable to ten more days of this life.”***

I open my blurry eyes and look around until my gaze falls upon Mama sprawled across the ground clutching on to my unmoving baby brother.

***“No more pain now. No more pain”***

At her side I see Laura’s lifeless frame. Her delicate brown curls lie drenched in a puddle of her own vomit and blood. My mind feels like it is about to explode. Second by second the room grows quieter around me. I can feel the poison burning in my body, yet some how my heart still thuds against my chest. Maybe there is a reason my body is still holding on.

Maybe help is on the way and I will survive. Maybe Mama and Michael and Laura are just sleeping. Maybe this is all just a horrible nightmare and any moment Laura’s small hand will shake me awake and ask me for a story.

My heart feels stronger and the coldness leaves my body. We are all going to be okay and years from now little girls will be reading my novel about the heroic princess.

Everything begins to look clearer and as the sound of thunder and rain pounds against the tin roof. A ball of sunshine is radiating within me. The bitter pain is gone and a peaceful stillness overtakes me. We can all be together as a family again... everything will— My eyelids grow heavy and fall down over my eyes. The Father’s voice rings loudly around the dark and silent room,

***“No more pain.”***

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*Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*. Dir. Stanley Nelson. By Marcia Smith and Noland Walker. Perf. Rebecca Moore, Janet Shular and Tim Carter. Paramount Home Video, 2006. DVD.

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Attribution of Research

1. “30 Years Later Survivors Remember Jonestown Massacre”FOX News Nov. 16 2006 Associated Press 16 Jan. 2012.

* The suicide occurred the night after the senator’s visit.
* Senator Ryan was assassinated during the day of the suicides.
* Families often betrayed one another. i.e. Samuel’s son turning him in.

2. "Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple." *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*. Web. 21 Feb. 2012. <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/>.

* The poison came in the form of grape flavored Flavor aid.
* The vats containing the poison had large green C’s painted on the sides.
* Infants and children were held down and given the poison through syringes squirted in their mouths.
* The adults drank willingly.
* Women and their children drank the poison first.

3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2004. Cyanide. Emergency Preparedness and Response. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Public Health Service: Atlanta, GA. http://www.bt.cdc.gov/agent/cyanide/index.asp

* Those affected by cyanide foam at the mouth and sometimes vomit.
* Cyanide had a distinct taste of bitter almonds.
* The poison leads to a loss of consciousness.
* Cyanide Poisoning causes troubled breathing and eventual suffocation or heart attack.

4. Chidester, David. *Salvation and Suicide: An Interpretation of Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988. Print.

* Members of Jonestown were required to wake up every day at 5 am.
* The climate of Guyana was tropical and hot.
* The village was surrounded by dense jungle.
* Some member’s worked in the fields while other had different duties.
* The People’s Temple traveled in Bus’s to recruit members.
* first founded.
* Some worked at the Children’s Garden.

5."Death Tape" (Q042) : FBI Transcription." *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*. Web. 24 Feb. 2012. <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/AboutJonestown/Tapes/Tapes/DeathTape.html>.

* All bolded Jim Jones lines are direct quotes from the Death Tapes:
* *“Free at last. Keep--keep your emotions down. Keep your emotions down.”*
* *“Children, it will not hurt. If you'd be--if you'll be quiet.”*
* *“So be patient. Be patient. Death is—“*
* *“Death is a million times preferable to ten more days of this life.”*
* *“No more pain now. No more pain”*
* *“No more pain.”*

*6. Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*. Dir. Stanley Nelson. By Marcia Smith and Noland Walker. Perf. Rebecca Moore, Janet Shular and Tim Carter. Paramount Home Video, 2006. DVD.

* The congregation migrated from San Francisco to Guyana.
* Children were separated from their parents, men and women also slept in separate cabins.
* Member’s called Jones “Father”
* Jones’s constantly played recordings of his voice on the loud speaker
* Most people suffered from lack of sleep.
* Many members of the congregation had left family behind.
* Preparation for Senator Ryan’s visit was extensive.
* There was music and dancing during Senator Ryan’s visit.
* There was a Children’s Choir at the People’s Temple.
* The People’s Temple was based on civil rights and socialist ideas when it was first founded.

7. Layton, Deborah. *Seductive Poison: A Jonestown Survivor's Story of Life and Death in the Peoples Temple*. New York: Anchor, 1998. Print.

* The Greetings Committee was in charge of rationing clothing and supplies.
* On the night of the suicide there was a thunderstorm.
* Over 900 people lived at the People’s Temple.
* Humiliations and punishments were public and occurred often.
* All members wore similar clothing.

8. "Top Names of the 1970s." *The United States Social Security Administration*. Web. 21 Feb. 2012. <http://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/decades/names1970s.html>.

* Character names: Laura Meadows, Marry Meadows, Matthew Meadows and Samuel.

9. "The Facts About Cyanides." *New York State Department of Health*. Web. 21 Feb. 2012.<http://www.health.ny.gov/environmental/emergency/chemical\_terrorism/cyanide\_general.htm>.

* Cyanide poisoning can cause death in anywhere from five minutes to five days.
* The effects of the poisoning can cause painful headaches and loss of speech.

10. "Young Hollywood Hall of Fame: Child Stars & Teen Idols." *Young Hollywood Hall of Fame: Child Stars & Teen Idols*. Web. 21 Feb. 2012. <http://www.younghollywoodhof.com/1970.html>.

* Used to find a teen idol in the early 1970’s, “…a man with eyes like *David Cassidy*